

Is Cholesterol Blocking Your Blood Vessels?

Blood cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance manufactured by the liver. It is needed for the body to function normally. The body uses cholesterol to make hormones, Vitamin D, and substances that help in the process of digestion. Cholesterol is also used in the body to provide the lining for nerve fibers, which help the nerves relay signals rapidly and efficiently.

The body makes cholesterol for its needs. Some is also taken in through diet. Blood is watery and cholesterol is fatty and, just like water and oil, the two do not mix. To travel in the bloodstream, cholesterol is carried in small packages called lipoproteins. The small packages are made of fat (lipid) on the inside and proteins on the outside. Two kinds of lipoproteins carry cholesterol throughout the body and it is important to have healthy levels of both of them.

HDL (High-Density Lipoprotein)

HDL is called the "good" cholesterol. HDL carries cholesterol from other parts of the body back to the liver. The liver removes cholesterol from the blood. The higher the HDL level, the less risk of getting heart disease.

LDL (Low-Density Lipoprotein)

Sometimes called "bad" cholesterol, higher LDL cholesterol levels lead to a buildup of cholesterol in the arteries. The higher the LDL level in the blood, the greater risk of heart disease. Cholesterol build-up is called plaque and over time can cause narrowing of the arteries (or "atherosclerosis"), hardening of the arteries, and heart disease.

There are no signs or symptoms of high blood cholesterol. Many people don't know that their cholesterol level is too high. High blood cholesterol is diagnosed by checking cholesterol levels. This is done with a blood test called "lipoprotein profile." It is important that people age 20 and older get their cholesterol levels tested at least once every 5 years.

What Are Optimal Blood Cholesterol Levels?

A lipoprotein profile is a test that measures the different kinds of cholesterol in the blood. Desirable or optimal levels are:

Total cholesterol: less than 200 mg/dL.

Low Density Lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol ("bad" cholesterol): Less than 100 mg/dL.

High Density Lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol ("good" cholesterol): 40 mg/dL or higher.

High blood cholesterol is also called Hypercholesterolemia (HI-per-ko-LES-ter-ol-me-a) or Hyperlipidemia (HI-per-lip-I-de-me-a).

Treatment of high blood cholesterol can include a Therapeutic Lifestyle Changes (TLC) diet, including limiting saturated fat, maintaining a healthy weight, increasing fiber, and increasing physical activity.

Some people will need to take medication prescribed by their physician to lower their cholesterol. Medications such as Statins lower cholesterol by slowing down the body's creation of cholesterol and by increasing the liver's ability to remove the "bad" cholesterol already in the blood.

For more information about cholesterol visit:

<http://www.cdc.gov/cholesterol/>

<http://www.americanheart.org>

<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov>

<http://www.nhlbisupport.com/cgi-bin/chd1/step2intro.cgi>